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Lakewood residents Cyndie Kleshock (left) and Michele Thompson study one of the many charts and graphs on display at the ADOT open house for the Loop 202 back in November. (U. Frank Williams Jr./AFN)

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News

Freeway foes seek support

By Doug Murphy
Staff Writer

A small group in Ahwatukee Foothills formed a nonprofit organization last month to block the South Mountain Loop 202 Freeway, and now they are looking for community support to help move the effort forward. PARC, which stands for Protecting Arizona's Resources and Children, will hold a community-wide meeting at 2 p.m. Saturday, Jan. 27 in the Pecos Park Community Center, 17010 S. 48th St. The purpose of the meeting is to hear from people who will be impacted by the proposed freeway and discuss the effects of a freeway near schools and homes.

Hard-luck freeway

Since its inception in the mid-1980s the freeway has had few friends, losing funding in the early 1990s, being proposed as a privately built toll road and then a municipal parkway. Now it's three years into a new study and environmental impact statement as a 10-lane, \$1.1 billion freeway connecting Interstate 10 in Ahwatukee Foothills, extending west along Pecos Road through a corner of South Mountain Park before turning north and skirting fuel storage facilities before reconnecting with I-10 around 55th Avenue.

For some, opposition to the freeway is simply the same old argument of any neighborhood that doesn't want a freeway built nearby. Supporters argue that it has been on the transportation maps since 1985 and that people should have known it was coming.

Air quality concerns

For PARC supporters, the issues are real.

"The Arizona Department of Transportation (ADOT) wants to put a freeway next to elementary schools and through South Mountain Park, and it's a bad idea," said Melanie Pai, a founder of the organization. She and others point to unanswered questions about air quality near the proposed freeway and how it would impact students in the Kyrene School District attending Akimel A-al Middle School and de los Lagos, de la Sierra, de la Estrella and del Milenio elementary schools as well as 3,000-plus students at Desert Vista High School, all of which are within blocks of the proposed freeway. In the case of Lagos, the school actually would back up to the freeway.

Arizona freeway opponents have had mixed success. Those opposed to State Route 51 lost, partly due to the huge demand of commuters to get from north Phoenix to downtown on something other than surface streets like Cave Creek Road and Tatum Boulevard. But the proposed Paradise Parkway, which would have cut through the heart of the Valley roughly along Camelback Road, was killed by then-Gov. Fife Symington because of mounting costs and strong opposition.

Similar Nevada case

PARC plans to go to court to stop the freeway, when and if a decision on the final route is ever approved by the federal government and ADOT. A 2005 case in Nevada gives them hope that the freeway's impact on young people may end up being key to killing the freeway along Pecos Road. In that case, Nevada and federal highway officials settled out of court a lawsuit brought by the Sierra Club that had stalled the widening of a key stretch of highway through Las Vegas because of health concerns at three nearby schools.

In the settlement the government agreed to install air filtration systems at the schools along U.S. 95 between downtown Las Vegas and the city's northwest section. The Federal Highway Administration also agreed to study air quality at up to five sites near highways around the nation to gauge the impact of freeways on air quality around schools. In return, the Sierra Club dropped the lawsuit that had been heard in federal court earlier in 2005.

The Sierra Club had argued that project planners failed to account for people living near the widened freeway who might be sickened by exhaust from increased automobile traffic.

No new updates

A citizens advisory team has been working with ADOT as it updates and revises the original Loop 202 plans. The team last met in spring 2006 when it proposed that the freeway route on the west side connect with I-10 at the current Loop 101/I-10 interchange, a suggestion that ADOT rejected in favor of roughly following 55th Avenue.

The team, made up of representatives from neighborhoods along the proposed route, is scheduled to meet in April, according to ADOT spokesman Matt Burdick, with a draft environmental impact statement being issued this summer. But for Councilman Greg Stanton, who opposes the freeway along Pecos Road, too much has changed in the past 20 years, and what might have been reasonable then is no longer appropriate. He hopes that a mutually beneficial agreement can be reached with the Gila River Indian Community to allow construction south of Pecos Road on tribal land, but so far the Indians have shown little interest in having the freeway.

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